

Fort Wayne resident, surely it was the Rev. Jesse White, 73, who died Monday.

Tall, with a linebacker's physique and a booming baritone voice that was equally effective in soft conversation as in delivering a sermon or demanding justice, the pastor of True Love Baptist Church had the rare ability to cut an imposing yet approachable presence in any room he entered.

Parishioners, friends and public officials will remember the Rev. White as much for his compassion in helping and serving people as in his passion for fighting for civil rights. For instance, one of his longtime friends, former City Councilman Charles B. Redd, remembers White as the civil rights leader who charged into a closed Fort Wayne Community Schools board meeting. But he also remembers the minister who would open his wallet to people in need, a caring pastor who ordered a youth caught looting a parishioner's car be taken not to jail but to the front of the congregation, where he prayed with the youth and asked the congregation to grant forgiveness.

His commanding presence and eloquence in giving voice to the wrongs of racism through a number of lenses—religion, the Constitution, economics, personally—made him a natural leader. He protested segregated Fort Wayne restaurants in the 1950s and 1960s. It was the Rev. White who helped direct a black boycott of Fort Wayne Community Schools in 1969, applying as much pressure on other black ministers to urge their congregations to participate as on the white leaders of the school system.

The Rev. White chose his battles wisely, a natural ability borne from the heart and soul, not public relations concerns, self-interests or pressure from others. "He was the kind of person who would do his own assessment, whether it was right or wrong, whether it was justice or injustice," Redd said.

Though the kept his long, signature sidebars long after they had become passe in a fashion sense, the Rev. White's approach changed along with the times. As the leader of the local Operation Breadbasket in the early 1980s, White set about to address the economic legacy of racism, leading boycotts—and negotiations—with national department store and grocery chains, urging them to hire more blacks at their Fort Wayne outlets. By the 1990s, White concentrated on helping the economically disadvantaged people in his own southeast neighborhoods, opening the 30-unit True Love Manor for senior citizen housing and the 52-unit Adams and Bruce Housing for people with disabilities. True Love's computer learning center helped more than 1,500 students ages 6 to 86 learn and upgrade their computer skills.

Through his ministry, his leadership in civil rights and his personal compassion, the Rev. Jesse White enriched his church, his neighborhood and Fort Wayne as a whole. He will be truly missed.

#### FIGHTER FOR JUSTICE CHANGED THE CITY (By Frank Gray)

When NAACP President Michael Latham heard last month that the Rev. Jesse White was ill, he went to his house immediately.

"I'm in tears, and he's still Dr. White," Latham said. "He never changed."

A week ago, White was still teaching at True Love Baptist Church, treating the disease that would quickly kill him as just something else to deal with.

Even on Saturday, as he lay in the hospital, unable to respond when Latham asked him whether he was OK, White signaled with his hand that everything was all right.

"He was full of life, not afraid of death," Latham said.

That's what White was like, unafraid of any showdown. He was used to them. In his 45 years in Fort Wayne, he'd had plenty, with companies, schools, even his own church at one point.

"Rev. White realized that things weren't going to change if someone didn't take action, so he led the march, he made the pronouncements that things were unfair," said Charles Redd, a former City Council member who had worked with White for decades.

"This community should be grateful," said the Rev. Temae Jordan. "We're enjoying the benefit of the struggles he took on."

Sometimes it was fun. White would occasionally have lunch with Redd at the Chamber of Commerce so plenty of people would see them and wonder what they were planning, Redd said. In reality, most of their serious discussions of strategy took place while bowling, he said.

Sometimes it was tense and serious.

When a local manufacturing company fired a handful of black workers for minor infractions several years ago, White thought the firings looked like a setup, he supported the fired workers as they picketed the company. He took their case to the top of the company. The business was afraid of repercussions from white workers if the fired workers were rehired, Redd said, but White created enough pressure that the men were reinstated.

Arguing that people without economic power have no power at all, White spearheaded boycotts of groceries and department stores to pressure them to hire more minority employees, and won.

His best-known boycott sowed seeds that are still growing today.

In 1969, White, along with officials in the Urban League and NAACP, protested that Fort Wayne schools were segregated. They presented solutions to the school board.

They were quickly rejected.

So White helped lead a boycott of Fort Wayne Community Schools. His and other churches established freedom schools and announced that black students would refuse to attend classes in the Fort Wayne schools.

Ninety-five percent of black students honored the boycott. Photos showed classrooms empty or with only one or two students.

Within days, the state took the side of the boycotters, forbidding the Fort Wayne district to build new schools or make additions to existing buildings.

It took two years, but a plan to eliminate segregation was approved, and the first magnet school, which draws students from across the district, was established.

The magnet school concept, long since expanded after later lawsuits, was first presented a generation ago by a group that included White.

White was one of a dwindling group, a man who took to the streets to call attention to things he didn't consider just.

In that sense he was a product of his time. He arrived in Fort Wayne at a time when the media didn't show up when a black man wasn't allowed to get on a bus. They only showed up when someone protested and boycotted. So that is what White did.

That had changed in the last 10 years or so for two reasons.

Times themselves had changed, Jordan said. Also, "When you're out on the front line, you see issues, but as you get older you realize that your greatest calling is to be a shepherd."

Until late last week, that was where the Rev. Jesse White could be found, shepherding people at the church he founded, though he knew he was also staring death in the face.

[From the Journal Gazette]

RIGHTS ACTIVIST JESSE WHITE DEAD AT AGE 73

(By David Gilner)

Nearly paralyzed by the brain tumor that would take his life three days later, the Rev. Jesse White insisted on leading a funeral service Friday for a parishioner he had baptized.

Three men physically supported the Rev. White, one of Fort Wayne's most renowned civil rights leaders, as he warned the audience about life's fleeting nature.

"Don't waste your time, young people, for time is a master," his daughter, Rhonda White, recalled him saying. "Once a second or a minute or a day goes by, you can not grab it back."

The Rev. White 73, knew how prophetic his words would be.

About 2 a.m. Saturday, the pastor was admitted to Lutheran Hospital, where he died at 2:30 a.m. Monday.

City officials and civic leaders throughout Fort Wayne mourned the loss of a man who spent more than half a century fighting racism.

Glynn Hines, Fort Wayne City Council's only black member, said the Rev. White was an icon of activism, who lived by the seize-the-day philosophy he promoted with his final sermon.

"That's his spirit of can-do, and I think he instilled that on many young people who came through his congregation," said Hines, who was baptized by the Rev. White in 1962.

A potent speaker and powerful singer, the Rev. White was a key member of Fort Wayne's "old guard" civil rights leaders who organized marches and boycotts to raise awareness of inequality.

Even in recent years, his thick glasses and thicker white sideburns could be spotted at rallies against crime on the city's southeast side.

"He may have been pleased with the inches of progress, but he was looking for miles," Hines said. "He always used to say, 'You'll know there's not a need to fight when there's not a need to fight.'"

The Rev. White was born in Natchez, Miss., in 1927. Traveling with a group of gospel singers, he first came to Fort Wayne in 1953. The next year, he made the city his home.

He became pastor of Progressive Baptist Church in 1955 and married Ionie Grace England in 1956. They had nine children.

In 1969, segregation sparked him to help lead a high-profile boycott against Fort Wayne Community Schools. He marched nationally and at home to raise awareness of discriminatory hiring at banks, supermarkets and retailers. He became a confidant of Jesse Jackson, whose presidential campaigns the Rev. White helped coordinate in 1984 and 1988.

Progressive Baptist grew under the Rev. White's leadership, becoming Greater Progressive Baptist Church after moving into its seventh home in 1972. A power struggle and allegations of financial impropriety led the Rev. White to resign from Greater Progressive and found True Love Baptist Church in 1974.

Both churches became major players on Fort Wayne's civil rights front. Any friction between the two was forgotten, said Greater Progressive Pastor Ternae Jordan.

Jordan became pastor 16 years after the Rev. White's resignation, and he was excited about the chance to work alongside the Rev. White.

"There was no animosity between Dr. White and myself," Jordan said. "I knew the name of Jesse White before I even came to Fort Wayne. I grew up in the home of a minister, and Jesse White was a household name